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THE TEACHING OF JESUS CHRIST CONCERNING HIMSELF AND HIS WORK¹

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We are sometimes invited to compare the Nicene Creed with the Sermon on the Mount, in order to observe how much they differ as presentations of the truth of Christianity. It would be possible to admit the obvious difference between these two compositions at its face value, and still give full honor to the fourth-century document with all its Greek metaphysics, if we could accept Cardinal Newman's theory of development, or apply Abbé Loisy's analogy of the oak, which is so very different from the acorn, from which nevertheless it is a legitimate growth. But what is the reason for bringing forward such a comparison? Apparently it is done on the tacit assumption that primitive and normative Christianity is limited to the contents of the great sermon. That is about as unreasonable as it would be to write down the preacher of a temperance or peace sermon as a Unitarian, because his discourse did not include an implicit assertion of the doctrine of the Trinity. We have no ground for supposing that Jesus put the whole of his theology into an exposition of the ethics of the kingdom of God.

Still, let us take the Sermon on the Mount—this collection of *logia*, as perhaps we should regard it—and for the moment look at it by itself, and see if it does not contain hints and evidences of what is more fully expressed later. We may note especially what the speaker calmly assumes with regard to himself. Thus he declares that “they of old” said this and that; but adds “I say”—the very opposite. Now, the sayings which he repudiates are found in the law, the most sacred portion of the Jewish Scriptures. Thus Jesus sets aside portions of this awful Torah merely on his own personal authority. The greatest of the prophets fortified their oracles with the formula, “Thus saith the Lord.” But Jesus goes beyond them and

¹ The substance of a lecture given at the University of Chicago, August 2, 1905.

is content to rest his revolutionary innovations on the simple assertion, "I say unto you." He concludes with the parable of the Two Houses, in which building on the rock and building on the sand represent respectively simply the difference between doing and not doing what Jesus calls with majestic simplicity "these sayings of mine." What an assumption of authority is here!

But why should we confine our attention to the Sermon on the Mount, which is no more specifically authentic than other teachings of Jesus in the synoptic gospels? The very sentence in which our Lord confesses to a limitation of his own knowledge contains a great assumption of personal dignity. "But of that day or that hour," says Jesus, "knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father."² Observe the ascending order—the angels, the Son, the Father—our Lord calmly placing himself between the angels and his Father. Then in the parable of the Vineyard, while it is evident that the servants stand for the prophets, in distinction from these servants Jesus, plainly referring to himself, says that the owner of the vineyard "had yet one, a beloved son; he sent him last unto them, saying, They will reverence my son."³ Or take the great parables of judgment which reach a climax in "The Sheep and the Goats." Here Jesus himself is the judge before whom all the nations are gathered. So again, in Matt. 11:27 we have a claim to divine sonship quite in the style of the fourth gospel.⁴

The few specimens here adduced might be supplemented by many others. You must tear the gospels to shreds, if you would remove from them the evidence that our Lord made the very greatest assumptions with regard to his own nature and dignity.

But now it may be objected that we are not usually content to take people at their own valuation of themselves, seeing that those who have most worth are commonly most modest, while the boasters frequently turn out to be empty pretenders. When we look into it, however, the empty pretense can be traced either to poor vanity or to blind fanaticism. Neither of these weaknesses can be thought of for one moment in connection with our Lord. He always manifests

² Mark 13:32.

³ Mark 12:6.

⁴ Wendt and Beyschlag argue that, though the style of that gospel is peculiar to itself, the substance of our Lord's teaching in it is not out of harmony with that contained in the synoptics.

what Matthew Arnold calls his "sweet reasonableness," and he never thinks of himself for his own sake; for his is the very spirit of lowliness and self-abandonment. Then how shall we account for these amazing assumptions of dignity, except by admitting that they spring spontaneously from the depths of his true self-consciousness?

There are two specific questions with regard to our Lord's teaching about himself on which I must briefly touch.

The first is his claim to be the Messiah. It has been maintained by some that he never made this claim, and Wrede has argued that the way in which the publication of the claim is supposed to be suppressed in the gospels is an attempt on the part of the evangelists to account for the fact that so little was heard about it, although they wished us to believe that Jesus put it forth, in accordance with the later teaching of the church. But the suppression of the claim points the other way, when we trace it out, especially in Mark, our primitive gospel. There we do not meet with it earlier than the crisis at Cæsarea, where Peter makes his great confession, "Thou art the Christ."⁵ Jesus accepts the confession, but requires secrecy about it. Here, then, we reach a second stage. Finally, in the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which is a deliberate adoption of Zachariah's conception of the gentle and peaceable Messiah, Jesus throws off all disguise and openly puts forth his claim, though he knows that in so doing he is sealing his death-warrant. To suppose that this gradual unveiling of the idea is not historical, but is a creation of the evangelist's art, is critically impossible, since the writers of our gospels were too naïve, too unconscious, and too objective in their method of telling their story, to be capable of so difficult a literary device. Jesus, it would seem, claimed to be the Messiah, just as he claimed to introduce the kingdom of God, realizing what was essential in the Jewish popular ideas, but liberating this from the crude materialistic form.

The second specific question is as to the use of the title "the Son of man." Light has been thrown on this question by recent Aramaic studies, from which it would appear that the phrase *Barnasha*, which we have rendered "the Son of man," was in common use among our Lord's contemporaries with the simple meaning of "man."

⁵ Mark 8:29.

This, then, it is said, is all that it could mean. Hence it has been argued that, if he used the phrase at all, Jesus could not have been applying it as a title to himself; he must have been speaking of mankind generally. Now, it may be admitted that there are one or two cases with regard to which this view may appear more or less plausible. For instance, when Jesus says, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: so that the Son of man is lord even of the sabbath,"⁶ it may be argued that mankind, or a man, any man who realizes his rights as man, is master of the day which is made for the use of man. Similarly, when he declares that "the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins,"⁷ it can be urged that this is parallel to the right of binding and losing which Jesus subsequently conferred on his disciples, as he also gave them powers of healing. But this interpretation will not stand when we reach those later sayings of Jesus which describe the Son of man coming in clouds of glory with his attendant angels.⁸ In such passages Jesus must be referring to himself; and the reasonable inference from this is that he always uses the phrase in the same sense. What is that sense? We meet with it in the "Similitudes" of the book of Enoch as the express designation of the Messiah; and Dr. Charles, our greatest authority on the subject, has shown that this portion of the book of Enoch was older than the time of Christ. It is probable that our Lord knew it. His language with regard to his return is very like what we read there, and the source in both cases may be traced back to Daniel. But here we are confronted with a difficulty; for if by calling himself "the Son of man" Jesus was just adopting the Enoch title of the Messiah, was he not publicly claiming to be the Messiah every time he did so? That would be contrary to his suppression of the title on the lips of his disciples. May we not find an explanation in this way? The phrase was not at all a popular title of the Messiah. But it was on everybody's lips as the common designation for a man. Therefore the mere use of it would not suggest the messiahship. Still it was a strange thing that anybody should use it as a sort of name for himself. Thus it would set the thoughtful wondering. Then, pondering over it, some of them might come to see in it an allusion to the Daniel or Enoch idea. Accordingly, while

⁶ Mark 2:27, 28.⁷ Mark 2:10.⁸ E. g., Mark 8:38.

to all it sounded a note of human brotherhood, to these more reflecting souls it would bring the further suggestion of the messiahship, but not dogmatically; and even then it would retain its original sense and feeling. Jesus wished to be welcomed only as a Christ who saved and ruled and won his adherents in the spirit of human brotherhood.

Let us now turn our attention to our Lord's teaching concerning his work. The program he enunciated at Nazareth in a quotation from Isaiah exactly characterized the object of his mission, as that was shown in all he said and did.⁹ He came to give light and liberty; sight for blind eyes, freedom for slaves. This was for the most helpless and needy, and therefore the announcement of it was good news for the poor. His light was the truth about God as our Father, and the secret of eternal life in following him. The liberty was emancipation from the tyranny of Jewish tradition; but, much more, it was soul-liberty in escape from all that enthralls and degrades. This his teaching and his healing continually illustrate, and it is so clearly written in the story of his life that few will care to dispute it.

But now there is one aspect of the work of Christ that has given rise to much discussion. Orthodox books of theology treat the work of Christ as consisting mainly of the atonement, and associate the atonement with the death of Christ. Thus it is represented that his work was his death; that his death was the object of his mission; that he was born in order that he might die. How far is this idea sanctioned by his own teaching? Here again we are bidden to observe the contrast between the elaboration of later theology and the simple teaching of Christ himself. Just as it has been said that the doctrine of the divinity of Christ is a later development, largely due to the apostle Paul, so it has been asserted that the doctrine of his atoning death is essentially Pauline.

Assuredly it is not to be denied that both of these great ideas of Christian theology are dwelt upon much more emphatically, and worked out with much more fulness, in the epistles than in the synoptic gospels. But we have seen, in the case of our Lord's divinity, that the essential idea is to be found in his own teaching. He claims to be the unique Son of God. How does his teaching stand with regard to the purpose of his death? His references to this subject

⁹ Luke 4:18.

may be compared with his treatment of his messiahship, with which they are closely connected. He never spoke of it until his messiahship had been owned by the disciples. But immediately after that had been done he made the startling announcement of his approaching death. The one follows sharp on the other at the crisis in Cæsarea. This would suggest that there is some connection between them; that it is as the Christ that Jesus will have to die. After this, our Lord spoke of "the decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem," with growing fulness of detail. Still as yet this was only represented as an impending future, and it was not shown to be connected with the work of redemption. Two explanations of our Lord's reticence in regard to that mystery have been suggested. It has been pointed out that the meaning of his death could not be understood till it had taken place, and had been followed by his resurrection, which flung back a new light on the cross; and it has been said that he came to die, not to talk about his death, so that we may learn the significance of his death by a contemplation of the crucifixion itself, better than we could learn it from anything he might have said on the subject.

But there are two sayings of Jesus Christ that go beyond the bare announcement of the approaching horror, and lift the veil for a moment so as to give us a glimpse of the end and object of the tragedy. First we have the saying: "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."¹⁰ In order to minimize the doctrinal force of these words, it has been urged that they only appear by way of illustration of the life of mutual service which Jesus is requiring in his disciples. But Paul's great christological passage¹¹ occurs similarly as an appeal to the example of Christ; so does Peter's reference to the truth that "Christ suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God;"¹² yet nobody ventures to deny the doctrinal force of these passages for that reason. Then it is pointed out that the emphasis of the passage rests on the idea of service. Christians should serve one another as their Master came to serve; the giving of his life is added as an appendix, an illustration of his service. Precisely so; but does now that make the reference to death the more significant? Our Lord's supreme act of service was the surrender

¹⁰ Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45. ¹¹ Phil. 2:5-11. ¹² 1 Pet. 3:18.

of his life. Then we may turn the thought the other way. The purpose of his death was to render service to men. We cannot weaken the passage by understanding the giving of Christ's life to mean the spending of his life in active service. The Greek word for life (*ψυχή*) will not bear that interpretation. Besides, we have analogous passages where death must be meant.¹³ Jesus is specific when he goes on to say that this gift of his life is as a ransom. Ransom was given for captives taken in war, and for lives which were about to be forfeited. Thus it might be a payment to effect the liberation of slaves or prisoners, or to obtain remissions of the death-sentence of convicts. Both of these forms of ransom would be familiar to readers of the Jewish Scriptures. Jesus does not say which he intends. Elsewhere he shows that he brings both kinds of deliverance; for he promises liberty to captives, and he offers eternal life to souls in danger of death. Therefore he might have both ideas in mind here. But his thought is directed to the positive aspect of the ransom. It brings deliverance, whatever the previous trouble or threatening danger may be. Now, the ransom is the price of the deliverance. So Christ's death is the price of the deliverance of the people whom he redeems. Here is an unmistakable connection between his death and his saving work. It is not easy to exhaust the meaning of his words by following Beyschlag in understanding them to mean that the moral influence of the contemplation of our Lord's crucifixion enables us to break away from our evil habits. There is a deeper mystery here; but it *is* a mystery. Jesus offers no explanation of the atonement; he states the fact. Lastly, this is "for many." The preposition rendered "for" (*ἀντί*), when associated with the idea of ransom, indicates exchange. So elsewhere we have the fuller word *ἀντίλυτρον* for a ransom. Christ gives his life in exchange for many souls, whom he thus ransoms.

The second passage in which Jesus unveils somewhat of the purpose of his death occurs in the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper.¹⁴ Now, although the saying of Christ about the symbolism of the communion cup is variously reported, there are certain phrases and ideas that recur in all four accounts, the preserva-

¹³ E. g., Mark 8:36.

¹⁴ Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25.

tion of which, in spite of the variations in other particulars, renders them the more significant. The three synoptic writers and Paul all agree in giving us the statement that the blood of Christ has a covenant character. It is blood of the covenant. This is a very peculiar idea. To the Jew it would be a very definite idea. He was familiar with the notion of God's covenants with his people; and the use of blood in the sacrifices of the law was frequent and suggestive. Then the covenant of the law itself had been sealed and confirmed by the sprinkling of the blood of a sacrificed animal.¹⁵ In view of that fact there could be no doubt that "the blood of the covenant" must mean the sacrifice confirming the covenant. Paul, followed by Luke, has "the new covenant." Plainly this is with reference to Jer. 31:31, where a new covenant is promised—a passage elsewhere claimed in the New Testament as fulfilled by Christ. Then the meaning must be that Christ's blood—i. e., the surrender of himself to God in death as a sacrifice—is the confirmation of this new covenant of the gospel, just as the sprinkling of the blood of a sacrificial animal had been the confirmation of the old covenant of the law. It is perfectly clear, then, that Jesus here speaks of his death as a sacrifice. Matthew adds that this was for "the remission of sins." Whether this is a part of our Lord's original sayings which only one evangelist reports, or, as some think, a catechist's explanatory note, it is in full harmony with the idea of the new covenant, since in Jeremiah that is especially characterized by forgiveness of sins. It is a covenant of pardon.

In view of all this, we cannot escape from the idea that Jesus here teaches the sacrificial character of his death. In the present day some people fight shy of all references to the blood of Christ, no doubt partly because they revolt against crude, gross references to the subject. Let them note this significant statement. I do not know that I have met with it before; but I venture to throw it out as beyond question: Since our Lord's reference to his blood as thus essential to our redemption is contained in all three synoptics, in one of Paul's most certainly authentic epistles—our oldest and best sources of primitive Christianity—and also reflected in John 6:53, it is *the very best authenticated of all our Lord's teachings*.

¹⁵ Exod. 24:7.